

Prehistoric Pottery.

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REPORT OF THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE.

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needed, shall be used by the said board of regents for the completion and equipment of such building.

SECTION 3. This act shall take effect and be in force from and after its passage and publication.

This bill had many warm friends in the legislature, and several elaborate arguments in its favor were made before the senate committee on education, and the joint committee on retrenchment and reform. It chanced, however, that the state university was in urgent need of other assistance of a costly character, and the library bill, after trembling in the balance for some weeks, was allowed to give way to the university's other and perhaps more pressing demands. The result of the winter's campaign was, nevertheless, satisfactory to the Society, for progress towards a new building was distinctly made; the needs of the library in this direction were canvassed thoroughly, and found to be actual, and the only argument we heard advanced against a new structure at the present time was one of financial expediency. The committee is clearly of the opinion that the cause of the Society advances with each fresh campaign for a new building, and that the time is now not far distant when its wishes in this respect will be fully met by the legislature, and these priceless collections be given a permanent fire-proof home, worthy of them and of the commonwealth in whose service the Society has zealously been engaged for upwards of forty years.

On behalf of the Executive Committee,

REUBEN G. THWAITES,
Corresponding Secretary.

PREHISTORIC POTTERY — MIDDLE MISSISSIPPI VALLEY.

BY JAMES DAVIE BUTLER, LL. D.

[Address delivered at the Forty-First Annual Meeting of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, December 14, 1893.]

The State Historical Society of Wisconsin has just added to its museum two hundred and fifty-four specimens of prehistoric pottery. Its purchase of the Perkins collection of copper implements, in 1875, rendered the Society easily first in that department of antiques. Nor was it far behind in the line of Indian curiosities, gathered by Governor Doty, and in relics of the stone age. The treasures of the ceramic art just now acquired form a new departure, and round up the circle of its exhibits. They are also more suited to spectacular display than any species of aboriginal remains which it has hitherto shown.

The new treasure-trove consists of two hundred and fifty-four pieces. They were all discovered in southeastern Missouri or northeastern Arkansas, in the Missouri counties of Scott, Mississippi, and New Madrid, and in Cross and Poinsett counties in Arkansas. All were found in graves of a depth of from two to five feet. They had usually been placed one each side of a skull. In transatlantic cemeteries similar vessels, when buried with the dead, were often purposely broken, either as a token of grief or to make them valueless in the eyes of grave-robbers. But these Mississippi memorials were laid in the dust unbroken, and probably contained food or drink. Indeed, when exhumed, so many of them were still whole, that only about ten per cent of the number needed to have their fragments glued together.

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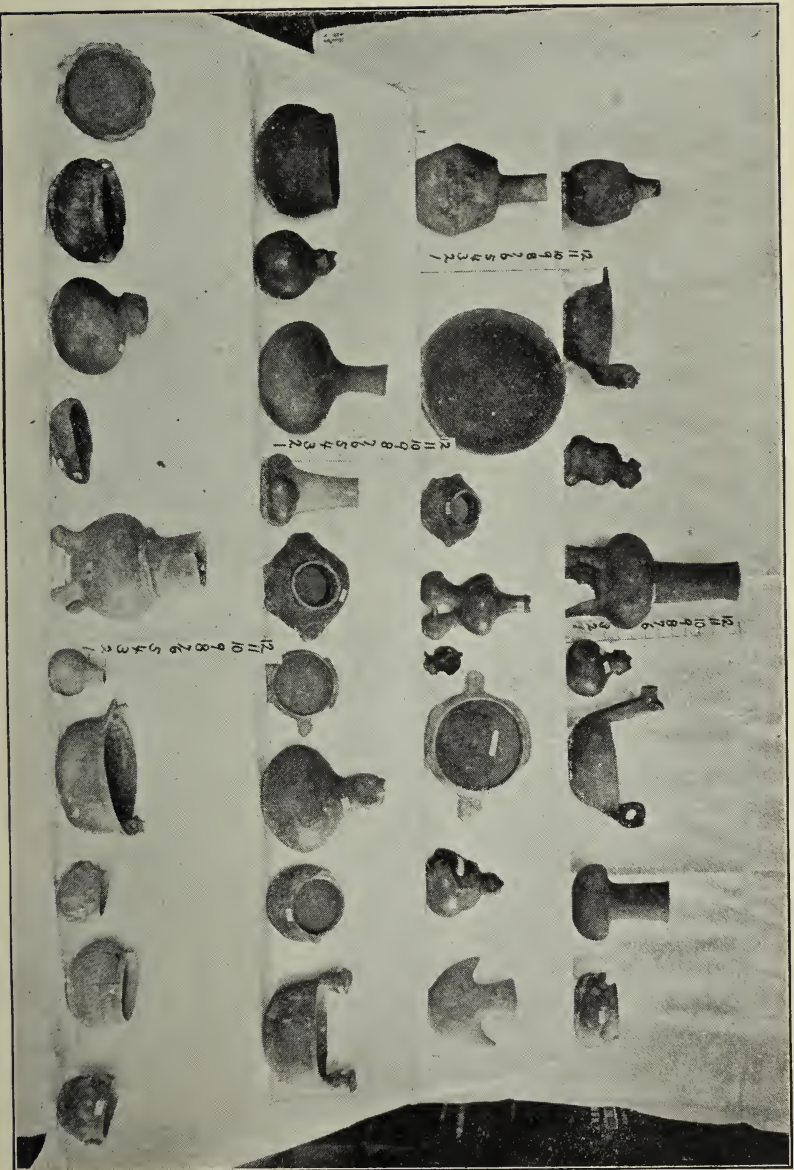


Plate I.

MISSOURI AND ARKANSAS PREHISTORIC POTTERY.

(Selections from Wisconsin Historical Society's collections.)

Photo. by F. W. Curtiss, Dec., 1893.

The material is clay of various colors, but usually blackish. It is tempered with bits of shell, which often give it a pepper-and-salt appearance, the pepper predominating. All the articles are hand-made—showing no trace of any wheel manufacture, but they are moulded in forms symmetrical and sometimes of classic elegance. None of this handiwork indicates acquaintance with the art of glazing—though some articles were rubbed smooth and reddened with ochre, or veneered with a different variety of clay. Not a few, in the shape of gourds or squashes, would seem to have been modeled and shaped on these natural moulds. Others show the forms of mud turtles, fishes, and various animals. A few imitate the human figure. One female, kneeling low, appears to be in an attitude and with a look of humble but earnest supplication.

The variety in form, size, and fashion is very considerable. There are shallow or wide-mouthed vessels which we term pans, bowls, basins, porringers, and cups, according to size and shape. One, seemingly copied from a shell, has a nose like a butter-boat. Where the mouths are somewhat narrower, we may call them pots, some of which would hold a pailful. Some pots have projections on their rims, or a sort of ears, through which thongs would slip to suspend them over a fire or elsewhere. Others run up in the style of long-necked birds, which serve as handles. The articles which are most narrow-mouthed, it is natural to call bottles. Of these some are as big-bellied as demijohns, while others are so slender that their bodies have only two or three times the diameter of their necks. At the base the bottles are either flattened, or they stand on three legs. When a neck supports the head of an animal, the animal's mouth sometimes forms the bottle mouth, but at other times that orifice is in the back of the animal's head. The ears of the human heads were pierced as if for ear-rings.

It will be observed that many styles of archaic pottery have no representatives in the collection we have now acquired. The coil pattern, for instance, so common further south and east, has here no existence. In this variety, the

clay long drawn out into a rope and rolled round, was then bent into circular layers, so as to form a base, then swelling sides, and then often the contracted neck of a jar or bottle.

A large number of our acquisitions bear some sort of ornament, as swelling bosses; or, on the other hand, sunken dimples, a sort of *repoussé* work produced by the artist's finger pressing the soft material from without or from within. Other styles of decoration are bits of clay stuck on outside here and there, like spit-balls. Sometimes rims are indented so as to resemble twisted cords or the links of a chain. At other times, there are lines straight or curved, or rising like the rafters of a house. But a majority of the specimens are totally unornamented. These relics devoid of ornament, one is at first inclined to ascribe to the most archaic era of the art. It is not, however, to be forgotten that bones of the mastodon — an animal now extinct — have been found carved with representations of hunting that animal, a find which argues that no art is more ancient than the taste for ornament.

What was the *beginning* of the potter's art? is a natural question. Herodotus tells a story concerning a Scythian custom, which may throw light on the invention of pottery. That people having killed an ox, would use his stomach as a caldron for boiling his flesh. Hung beneath a tripod and high over a fire, such a kettle of green tripe would stand much heat while the flesh was boiling. Now and then, however, it must burn through. What more natural than to stop leaks with the clay on which it may be the fire had itself been kindled? It is the first step that costs. After one clod had been stuck on, the whole stomach would be speedily covered with such fire-fenders, and at the next step would be discarded altogether when the clay pot was once well-baked, or rather would perish in the baking. Behold the possible genesis of prehistoric pottery.

American archæologists hold that our pottery originated, relatively speaking, earlier than that of Egypt. In saying "relatively speaking," they have reference to the fact that no Egyptian pottery is older than alphabetic

writing in the land of the Nile, while all our relics of that sort were fashioned among peoples who had not yet invented any sort of A. B. C.'s. Our handiwork seems then to run back to an earlier stage of development than the earliest Egyptian survivals.

The lessons we shall learn from our new discoveries of primeval art, it is impossible to foresee. Varieties in the fashion of vessels may demonstrate the lines of demarcation between tribe and tribe — each fish, bird, or animal, may give us a clue to the emblem or totem distinguishing one clan from another. Ornamental lines which we at first ascribe to capricious fancy may at length turn out to be significant, each one, of some real fact.

As a possible aid to future interpretations of what is as yet hieroglyphical, we have procured from William J. Seever, of St. Louis, from whom our purchase was made, both a general description of the St. Francis valley, the head-centre of mound-builder burials, and a list of all the several localities there in which our relics were from first to last gathered up. This article, appended to the present paper, has appeared indispensable for the profitable study of the collection now garnered in our museum. It will also be invaluable as a guide in making and appreciating further researches.

My own hope is sanguine, that within a decade our museum will be enriched — thanks to our collections from states south and west — with a prehistoric treasure-trove of Wisconsin pottery. No specimen of that sort has indeed hitherto come into our possession. But we know that some of them exist, indeed we have seen and handled them. Among the fifty thousand visitors who annually walk through our show-room we trust that some, now unknown to us, will prove to be owners of these rarities, and will be disposed to place them where they will do most good. In juxtaposition with types from a distance — each class lending and borrowing light by mutual reflection — they will aid, more than can be foreseen, comparative research "in the dark backward and abysm of time."

[Paper submitted at the Forty First Annual Meeting of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, December 14, 1893.]

From the city of Cape Girardeau on the Mississippi river, a well defined line of bluffs extends in a general southwesterly direction across the corner of the state of Missouri, and on into Arkansas. This line of bluffs forms the boundary between the high and low lands of Missouri and Arkansas. An offshoot called Crawley's ridge sets out in Stoddard county, Mo., passing through the Missouri counties of Stoddard and Butler, and continuing through Arkansas into Clay, Green, Craighead, Poinsett, Cross, St. Francis, Lee, and Phillip counties, terminating near the city of Helena, just below the mouth of St. Francis river. This ridge forms the watershed of the St. Francis and White rivers, and is the dividing line between the valleys of these two streams. The region to the east and north of Crawley's ridge is termed the Swamp ridge of Missouri and Arkansas. It attains in places a width of forty miles, and a length north and south of about two hundred and fifty miles. The general surface is but little above the mean stage of water in the Mississippi river, and is yearly subject to overflow.

It is in this valley, principally along the banks of the Mississippi, St. Francis, and Little rivers — the two latter of which extend through it from north to south — that the most extensive remains of the mound builders are found. On the banks of the St. Francis and its tributaries, at a distance of every few miles, are found large groups of mounds which were once the seats of an extensive population. Three, four, and often a dozen or more mounds

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Thompson

